

TRANSLATING TEXTILES, TRANSLATING MATERIALITY: INTERSEMIOTIC TRANSLATION IN HARYANVI CLOTHING

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ABSTRACT: Haryana, a state in Northern India, has a rich tapestry of oral narratives, rituals, and traditions, yet few scholars acknowledge that there exists a distinct Haryanvi culture at all. It therefore becomes compelling to document the rituals celebrated across the state as well as the material culture associated with them, such as clothing and jewellery. Borrowing from the theoretical paradigm of intersemiotic translation, this paper focuses on understanding the construction and reconstruction of meanings in Haryanvi folklore, material culture and their transfer between sign systems.

By understanding ethnographic practice as a kind of translation, the paper also aims to establish a research methodology that enables materials like textiles to be translated across different spatiotemporal zones.

KEYWORDS: Textiles, Intersemiotic Translation, Ethnography, Material Culture, Haryana

1. Introduction: Haryana, Translation, Material Culture

Haryana, a state in north India, possesses a valuable cultural heritage in the form of oral narratives, rituals, traditions and customs. Yet, despite this rich sociocultural fabric, Haryana, its language and its culture, are often overlooked by researchers. Since the Haryanvi language does not have a written script, it is subsumed under Hindi; and because the state was historically part of the much richer state of Punjab, the very existence of a distinct Haryanvi language and culture is frequently called into question.

Although Haryana is a Hindi-speaking state, the people speak various regional dialects, including Ahirwal, Mewati, Bagri and Khaadar. The most common dialect, heard in eastern and central regions, is Haryanvi. While many regional dialects in India have their own linguistic scripts, Haryanvi does not, which means that its folklore has to be conveyed orally, through rituals or through traditional material culture like textiles, clothing items, embroidery or jewellery. Given the rapid march towards modernization and urbanization, and resulting homogenization, which is leading to a fast-paced loss of cultural heritage, it becomes imperative to document Haryana's material culture, such as clothing and jewellery. This paper is an attempt to document those material expressions and translate them for a larger audience.

Within Haryanvi sociocultural milieu, women are involved in textile production, making garments, embroidering, and knitting. One material expression of Haryanvi folklore is its embroidery, an art that is created and nurtured by Haryanvi women through their bodies, making it a deeply personal form of expression. The distinct motifs and colours offer these artisans ways of constructing and translating their identities as women, creators, and artists.

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Through the embroidery and wall art that are part of various rituals like *Sanjhi*, *Kuan Pujan* and *Dev Uthan Ekadashi* (see below), they articulate their emotions and express their aspirations and experiences.

The embroidery tradition of the Indian subcontinent, is one of the most diverse and masterly in the world (Paine, 1990, p.7). For Haryanvi women, embroidery is not just a traditional craft which has been passed onto them by the older generations; it is also a critical mode of self-expression, which enables them to shape and hence articulate their aspirations in ways that words cannot express. Thus, textiles, clothing, and embroidery become both forms of self-expression and a response to the sociocultural realities in which they live.

This paper uses intersemiotic translation (Jakobson, 1959, p. 233) as a framework for the analysis of Haryanvi textile culture, and also draws on Myrdene Anderson's work on ethnography where she brings together cultural anthropology and Piercean semiotics to examine ethnography as a translational process (2003). She argues that an ethnographer is always "recursively translating" on multiple levels, translating observed behaviour into field notes and later those notes into an analytic monograph.

In what follows, we present the results of the ethnographic fieldwork we conducted in Haryana during the months of September and October in 2021 and 2022, which focused on the documentation of Haryanvi clothing, embroidery and textiles. As we both belong to the same Haryanvi community, we were able to reach our respondents—women aged between twenty-five to sixty—through our relatives and friends, who thus acted as gatekeepers. We interviewed twenty-five Haryanvi women across several districts of Haryana (Jhajjar, Rohtak, Gurugram, Mewat, Rewari, and Hisar), exploring their perception of Haryanvi textiles and clothing. We use 'thick description', as introduced by Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), to examine not only the textiles themselves but also the forms of social action which bring them into being and the contexts in which they are performed, emphasising the why, when, what, and where of these social events (Geertz, 1973, p.6).

We also observed our respondents' day-to-day activities, their daily routines and interpersonal interactions. Through our emic perspective, we were able to interpret our respondents' behaviour and dismiss any overly homogeneous ethnocentric descriptions. In doing so, we consider that we ourselves were ultimately performing intersemiotic translation of non-linguistic resources.

2. From Language to Materiality: Textile Translation

The conceptual boundaries of Translation Studies have expanded over the past few decades, moving beyond the linguistic transfer of texts, towards investigating meaning-making across multiple semiotic systems. Contemporary scholarship now recognizes translation as a multi-sensory, multi-modal, and culturally situated practice which extends beyond verbal communication. This disciplinary shift has challenged language-centric models of translation by focusing on visual, material, performative, and embodied modes of meaning-making. It is within this context that intersemiotic translation has emerged as one of the key significant theoretical developments in translation studies.

The foundation of this understanding can be traced back to Roman Jakobson's (1959) seminal classification of translation into three types: interlingual, intralingual and intersemiotic. However, although Jakobson's classification broadened the scope of translation, it remained limited to the translation of verbal signs through non-verbal media and did not extend to transfers between two non-verbal systems, such as textiles, which we discuss here.

At around the same time, semiotic approaches to material culture were developing interpretive frameworks that would prove useful for translational analysis. Particularly relevant for our purposes is Roland Barthes' *The Fashion System* (1967), which notes that garments "speak" through culture, implying that fashion is a language, translated by fashion magazines into verbal descriptions (p. 41). Clothing converses via conventions, codes and symbolic associations, effectively cultural texts capable of encoding ideology, identity, and memory. Such a perspective pushes the scope of translation beyond verbal meanings by identifying material culture as an active participant in meaning-making. That is to say, textiles are no longer passive objects but semiotic artifacts inviting interpretation and translation.

Julia Bryan-Wilson's *Fray: Art + Textile Politics* (2007) also discusses the signifying potential of textiles, this time in the context of American cultural history from the 1970s. She examines their usage as a medium of political expression amongst amateurs and fine artists, conformists and marginalized groups, arguing that they are political precisely because they are ubiquitous, historically tied to undervalued women's work, and intimate, being worn on bodies.

Meanwhile, the expansion of the field of translation studies beyond the linguistic has also led to a renewed engagement with material culture. Although texts, performance, and images have long been examined under the rubric of intersemiotic translation, recent work has increasingly identified material culture as a complex semiotic system that transports cultural knowledge. Objects are now understood as active participants in shaping and communicating culture, embodying memories, histories, identities, and social relationships.¹

Within this theoretical shift, textiles are positioned significantly. As compared to conventional verbal texts, textiles communicate through embodiment, and their meanings emerge through sensory, cultural, and historical engagement. Clothing, embroidery, and weaving comprise semiotic systems whose meanings are continuously negotiated. For Africa Vidal Claramonte, whose book *Textile Translations* (2026) focuses exclusively on this subject, textiles transport sociocultural, historical, and political narratives, communicating not with words, but

with touch, and the whole body. The basic premise ... is that the sense of touch communicates by interconnecting all of the senses and by interweaving emotions, thus intertwining with that "polyphony of the senses" (p. 5).

¹ See, in particular, Africa Vidal Claramonte's *Translation and Objects* (2025a), Piotr Blumczynski's *Experiencing Translationality* (2023), and the various essays included in the two volumes produced under the auspices of the *Experiential Translation Network* (Campbell and Vidal, 2024a; Vidal and Campbell, 2024b).

Loredana Polezzi (2020) also discusses textiles as a form of material translation in the work of three women artists whose families had a history of migration from Italy to the United States and Australia. Arguing that this kind of translation does not involve substitution and erasure but is rather a form of co-presence in which the original culture remains visible alongside the new, she shows how such fabrics testify to and make visible “the tension between continuity and discontinuity that lies at the heart of transnational experiences and transcultural narratives” (p. 320).²

Textiles have attracted interest within sociology, anthropology, material and cultural studies, but remain comparatively under-theorized within translation studies, despite the above exceptions. These gaps are particularly evident with regard to South Asian vernacular traditions. Although India’s textile cultures are remarkably diverse, there has been, to our knowledge, no research on Haryanvi practices through the assimilated frameworks of intersemiotic translation, material culture, and ethnography. The present study addresses these gaps by imagining Haryanvi textile traditions as embodied systems of cultural meaning that continuously negotiate relationships between collective memory, materials and materiality, and social identity.

3. Haryanvi Textiles: A Forgotten Legacy

Haryana is an agrarian state in Northern India that could also be seen as a microcosm of India’s economic growth and development. According to the Economic Survey of Haryana 2023-24, RBI, the state has the second highest per capita income in the country. It also has an 8% growth rate as of financial year 2023-2024, which is above the national average of 7%. Contributing to India’s food security, especially in wheat, rice, and dairy, the state provides approximately 12% of India’s total wheat production, 5% of India’s total rice production, and 10% of India’s total mustard production. It is also the second largest milk producer, and contributes 60% of total basmati rice export production.³ Haryana is also a leading industrial state with some of the key industrial zones as Gurugram-Faridabad-Delhi-NCR belt having automobile, information and technology (IT), financial companies and corporate hubs. Another city, Panipat exports 75% of India’s total textiles, while Yamuna Nagar is home to Asia’s largest plywood manufacturing hub.⁴

However, the condition of women remains grim in Haryana’s mostly traditional sociocultural fabric. Prem Chowdhry in *The Veiled Women: Shifting Gender Equations in Rural Haryana, 1800-1990* (1994), discusses how patriarchal norms and colonial-era policies have led to the marginalization of women. She describes how various land inheritance laws (such as Punjab Customary Law) institutionalized a preference for sons in the state, and uses archival research and ethnographic fieldwork to affirm that, despite the Hindu Succession Act (1956), Haryanvi women still “gifted” their land to brothers to maintain family harmony (p.142).

² See also Polezzi (forthcoming), which continues these themes.

³ Government of Haryana, Department of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare 2023-2024 Report.

⁴ Government of Haryana, Economic Survey of Haryana 2023-24, Department of Economic and Statistical Affairs, 2024.

Similarly, Ravinder Kaur in “Mapping the Adverse Consequences of Sex Selection in Haryana” (2013), argues, through her interviews with fifty families in Jhajjar, Haryana, and through an examination of census data, that over 68% of clinics she surveyed in Jhajjar offered illegal sex-determination tests (p. 40), which doctors justified as “helping families avoid dowry burdens” (p. 39). Her study is significant as it identifies a link between neoliberal healthcare markets and femicide.

Sociologist Neerja Ahlawat, who conducted interviews with mothers regarding family decision-making in various districts of Haryana such as Sonapat and Jind, comments that 73% of families withdrew girls from school at puberty (2013, p. 370): “a son is an ATM card; a daughter is an SBI (State Bank of India) loan”, she humorously affirms (2013, p. 368). This grim reality is supported by the most recent census data available,⁵ where the sex ratio in Haryana is 830 girls per 1,000 boys – a reflection of the honour killings, son preference, female foeticide and general misogyny. Unsurprisingly, there is also strong resistance to allocating property rights to women, with strict regulations regarding marriage and the compulsion to provide dowry. If a woman refuses to comply with these customs, she might be disowned, forcibly married, or killed for violating the honour of their caste, clan, and family. As for married Haryanvi women, they are expected to wear the *ghunghat* (headscarf), particularly in the rural areas. Even though they contribute financially to their families through agrarian labour and domestic chores, they remain excluded from decision-making processes.

Haryanvi women thus exist on the margins of these oppressive, dominantly patriarchal socioeconomic structures. However, certain rituals such as *Sanjhi* (Dhandhi & Sigroha, 2025a; Dhandhi and Sigroha, 2025b),⁶ *Kuan Pujan* (Dhandhi & Sigroha, 2025c),⁷ and *Dev Uthan Ekadashi* (Dhandhi & Sigroha, 2025d)⁸ also serve as important spaces for interactions amongst women, enabling them to display agency. In these gatherings, they resort to weaving, knitting, and embroidery as necessary recreational activities, which allow them to gather as well as express themselves through their art, and while doing so, communicate with other women.

Our journey with Haryanvi textiles began in 2019 when we started on our quest for semiotic resources that did not involve verbal language. One day Muskan’s mother took out her *jaal*⁹ from her *diwan*.¹⁰ Muskan was spellbound by it. The elegant textile and its beautiful embroidery gave us that semiotic resource we were searching for. However, at the same time, we knew that finding such fabrics and embroideries would be a challenging task. Handpicking

⁵ Census of India, 2011.

⁶ A women-centric ritual celebrated during September or October across several villages in Haryana and neighbouring states in Northern India where young women cover village walls with cow dung and clay to create their own interpretations of the goddess *Sanjhi*.

⁷ A women-centric ritual practised across Northern India where women worship a well or drinking fountain for twenty-one days after the birth of a child. It involves an offering of prayers, grains, and fruits to seek blessings for the mother and the newborn.

⁸ Another women-centric ritual celebrated around ten days after *Diwali*, it marks the awakening of Lord Vishnu from his four-month long sleep, which symbolises a fresh beginning to the Hindu wedding season. To mark the occasion, Haryanvi Hindu women gather to create illustrations, sing folksongs, and perform several rituals.

⁹ Literally meaning ‘net’, this is a kind of headcover.

¹⁰ A single bed, generally with a storage space underneath.

clothing items that were available at home, we started examining them with a keen eye. Thus began our search for both Haryanvi textiles, and the women who still gin, spin and embroider them. After much discussion and an extensive field survey, we were finally able to contact a handful of Haryanvi women who still spun and wove. Aged mostly between 60 and 70 years of age (though some were younger), these women from amongst our respondents understood the need to archive, even if they didn't really understand the idea of research; indeed, they emphasized the importance of documenting, preserving, and making available these textiles and embroideries, which would otherwise soon be lost to the younger generation. We were thus permitted to access the splendid textiles and exquisitely embroidered pieces from our respondents' private collections, which we discuss and analyse in some detail below. The ethnographic fieldwork enabled us to document the significance of making and embroidering such textiles through our respondents' personal reminiscences.

Material culture, including embroidery and clothing, involves both verbal and non-verbal means, including figuration and abstraction. Elements such as colour and texture are deployed to elicit emotion. Referring to the long history of using textiles to resist power in Latin America,¹¹ Jimeno, Varela, and Castillo (2018) posit,

Emotional communities are created through the process of narrating to another, testifying lived suffering through a story, a narrative, to someone else, and succeeding in the other identifying with the pain [...] when the pain of the victim does not remain enclosed in the victim, but spreads to other audiences, who identify and are deeply moved by the narrative, this creates a political bond, not simply a compassionate moment. This *political* link contributes to enhance actions that seek justice [...] and for victims to be holistically compensated... (p.5)

Embroidery, and textiles more generally, can be an especially useful means to translate the stories or experiences of its women creators, as, to outsiders, the practice appears entirely innocuous. The gender and age bias makes its practitioners seem powerless (Prain, 2014) and generates feelings of affection towards the pieces "as though they had been created by a senior matriarch" (Chalmers, 2010, p. 37). The pieces are also perceived in a positive light because they have been crafted by hand, are labour-intensive, and involve much planning and preparation in advance. Thus, "instead of screaming", the embroidered work will, "hit viewers' eyes before their ears and allow a different sensory process of storytelling to emerge" (Greer, 2015, p. 117). Narratives that are difficult to convey, "become less overwhelming when translated to stitch" (Chalmers, 2010, p. 40).

Another advantage is the sheer materiality of the work, which "takes your feelings and turns them into something ..." (Greer, 2008, p. 113), as well as extending their lifespan and amplifying their voice. They thus become a form of resistance, as emotions are transformed into "something we can hold in our hands and wrap around us ..." (Greer, 2008, p. 115). In this

¹¹ In some cases, elements of the oppressive narrative are visual translated into the textile (see Stanfield-Mazzi, 2013, p. 69 and Vidal Claramonte 2026, pp. 79-90).

sense, therefore, women embroiderers are not only artists but also become translators, endowed with agency.

4. Haryanvi textiles

This section looks at the textiles and embroidery of Haryana and discusses what they mean for the women of Haryana.

4.1. Types of Haryanvi textiles

*Sopli*¹²



Figure 1. Examples of Sopli

These traditional wraps or shawls are often heavy *odhanies*¹³ made of *reja*¹⁴, mostly maroon in colour. They are generally heavily embroidered on all four edges, predominantly with yellow cotton thread though also with a peppering of pink, blue, green, and white. The edges are adorned with a *goth*¹⁵ made from black cloth and featuring light herringbone stitch embroidery in white thread. Alternatively, some may have a thin crocheted edging all around. Most of the motifs are geometrical in shape with herringbone stitch, double daring stitch, satin stitch, and cross stitch. Some of them also bear mirror work.

*Kandh*¹⁶

These are traditional wraps for the upper body, like a shawl, made from finer cotton threads than *reja*; therefore, they tend to be finer than the *sopli* but coarser and thicker than the *chunni/dupatta/voil*. These would be often decorated with embroidered motifs such as birds,

¹² A garment that is wrapped around the upper body, not unlike a contemporary shawl in its dimensions and purpose. Also known as *doobla* or *dukania*.

¹³ *Chunni* or long, broad scarves, nowadays commonly worn with traditional Indian *kurta* and *salwar*.

¹⁴ Traditional Haryanvi fabric similar to Khadi, keep one cold during summers, and warm during winters.

¹⁵ Literally meaning a lace, this was a binding or a hem on the edges of the *sopli*, made from a different cloth and not lace.

¹⁶ Wrap, bigger than the current *chunni*.

flowers, animals, human figures, etc., more delicate than those on the *sopli*, and usually with embroidery around the borders.

*Jaal*¹⁷



Figure 2. Examples of Jaal

Like the contemporary *dupattas/chunnis*, *jaals* used to be made of comparatively thinner threads, even softer than *kandhs*. They are called *jaals* because they have extensive floral embroidery with multi-coloured threads, almost like a net (to catch fish or birds). These were mostly available in only two colours — pink and purple.

*Indhi*¹⁸

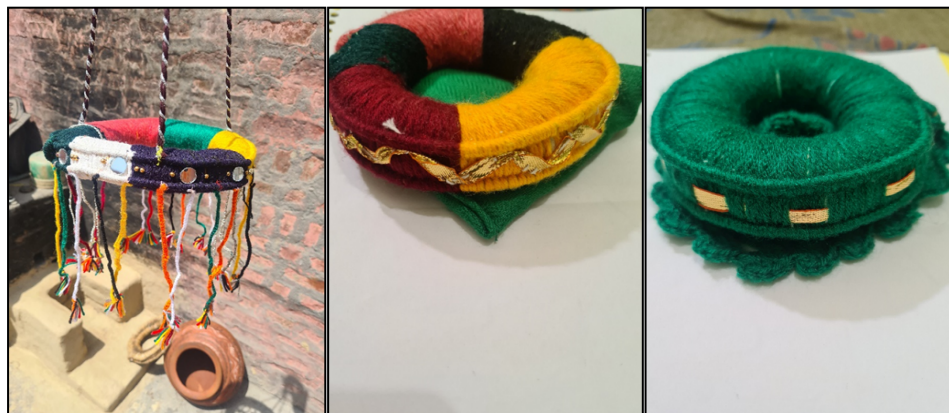


Figure 3. Examples of Indhi

Two of the major chores allocated to women in rural Haryana were to fetch water from the wells some distance away, and to carry dung to a designated place on the periphery of the village's residential areas. Water would be fetched in big earthenware jars or (later) brass pots, while dung would be carried in open wicker or iron baskets (*taslas*). Both would be carried on the head, placed on soft woven rings called *indhis* which provide a buffer. These were traditionally handmade, woven with wool in different colours and with varied designs and patterns, and the hole in the centre would be covered with a cloth to protect their hair and

¹⁷ Literally meaning net.

¹⁸ Rings used on the head to support pots for water and other things.

provide more cushioning. These were essential items in Haryanvi households, so much so that young girls would make many fancy ones in bright colours for their trousseau.

In fact, carrying water used to be the highlight of a woman's day, a social activity, when she would dress up in bright new clothes and wear all her jewellery (kept handy in earthen pots in the house) to showcase her appearance. Though veiled, the women would meet, have conversations, share news, and gossip while fetching water.

Khes

A *khes* is a blanket, which men would use to wrap themselves during the day, but which could also be used as a bed cover, or as a wrap during winter. They are made from *reja*, cotton, and are generally handwoven.



Figure 4. *Khes*

Haryana is known for its production of *khes*, and their weaving has immense social and cultural importance in the state. Though *khes* are mostly simple or plain in design, some may have geometrical patterns, while others may have a simple flower or cross embroidered on a corner to distinguish the maker's family from others in the broader social group.



Figure 5. 52 Gaj daman¹⁹ and chundari; A respondent wearing her Haryanvi attire.

¹⁹ 52-yard skirt worn with a long shirt (kurta) as a part of everyday traditional clothing for women.

4.2 Social uses of traditional Haryanvi textiles

Most of our respondents wore Haryanvi attire on special occasions, such as for festivals, weddings and other celebrations. However, one of our respondents, a 77-year-old woman from Bahadurgarh informed us that she used to wear the attire daily, especially when going to fetch water, because, she told us, “I like wearing it”.

Another respondent, from Charkhi Dadri, commented on the cultural significance of these textiles. For her, they not only constitute an aspect of her identity and her culture, they also pay tribute to her grandparents, who used to wear them daily. “It is significant to document the culture of our state,” she observes, “as the younger generation will not remember if it is not documented”.

Similar sentiments were shared by some of our respondents who belonged to the 40-50 year age group, and who live in the metropolitan cities of Haryana. A respondent from Gurugram explained that she liked wearing Haryanvi jewellery and clothing as “they look old and are difficult to find”,²⁰ are crucial identity markers, make her “look different” and “enable her to be a centre of attention within her circle of friends”.²¹ However, her husband doesn’t appreciate it, as for him they make her “look like an illiterate, uneducated and traditional”,²² an unfortunate popular assumption that the people of the state, the state, and its culture face every day. But for most of our respondents, the traditional attire symbolizes their culture and sociocultural identity.

Regarding the significance of embroidery, one of our respondents, a 75-year-old woman who used to gin, spin, and weave *reja* on her loom, said that she embroiders in her free time as a form of leisure and feels liberated in the process. Something similar was also expressed by another respondent, a 48-year-old homemaker from the village of Babarpur in Jhajjar. When we visited her, she was in the middle of embroidering and enthusiastically displayed her embroidered pieces including a *sopli*, *reja rajai* and *jaal*. She explained: “I embroider, stitch, knit because it is my identity, and I like doing so. It makes me happy and keeps me busy”.²³ This conversation motivated us to understand and look deeper into embroidering and weaving as an activity. For most of our respondents, weaving and embroidering is significant; it makes them happy, keeps them busy, and contributes to their identity formation.

During one of our interviews, a neighbour of our respondent came over in the middle of the conversation. Our respondent started talking to her, and as the conversation meandered on, they began discussing patterns, motifs, colour schemes, threads, and fabrics for their current and upcoming weaving routines. When we enquired if they wove or embroidered together, our respondent brought out a beautiful *voil*²⁴ from her private collection, which she had embroidered with her friend “within 4-5 days”.

²⁰ “पुराने से लागे सैं अर आसाणी ते मिल्ले कोनी”

²¹ “न्यारी सी दीख जा सू”

²² “गवारां अर अनपढ़न जिस्से लागे सैं”

²³ “मैं कढ़ाई, सिलाई, बुनाई ज्यां तैं करूं सु क्योंकि या मेरी पिछान सै, अर मन्ने सुथरा लागै सै। घनी खुशी हुई सै, अर लागी रहूँ सू”

²⁴ A traditional wrap also used to cover head and the chest.



Figure 6. Voil with traditional embroidery and *gota*²⁵; Saree with traditional embroidery

They had purchased the sequins and *gota* from the nearby market and embroidered it together. Our respondent told us that it took her 15 days to embroider the saree in the picture above. She describes the stitch as *bel* (vine) on the ends, and *phool* (flowers) as motifs, which is similar to Gujarati embroidery. This also shows how the stitches, motifs and patterns also get carried across cultures, as well as change subtly with the passage of time and exposure to other cultures – a form of ‘translationality’.²⁶

This observation is crucial for our understanding of embroidery as a collective activity. Haryanvi women often embroider and weave in groups of four to five. This activity both facilitates identity construction in the women, who act as artists and creators, and allows them to operate collectively. Women teach one another different patterns and motifs, and thus build closer relationships. It also enables them to perform a collective identity, where they can discuss and talk about newer ways of making such pieces, enabling them to function as creators.

We might wonder why these women embroider and do not simply buy the items from the market. One reason is that such clothing pieces are immensely expensive. Haryana is a deeply patriarchal society, where most women still cannot afford to purchase such items; therefore, they create them themselves. In addition to making something for themselves, this group activity also helps them form women-specific spaces within the patriarchal society that they are a part of. These spaces are of immense importance because as women make or embroider, they exchange ideas, discuss problems and issues as well as share joys and sorrows

²⁵ Traditional lace stitched to the ends of any traditional headscarf or wrap.

²⁶ Robinson defines ‘translationality’ as ‘transformationality: the constant emergingness of everything, through embodied, situated, performative interactions’ (2017, x). Blumczynski develops the concept further, adding that has its roots in “an individual and collective sensory experience wrapped in thick layers of symbolic significance” (2017, p. 179), and that is also “that aspect of material culture that experientially connects us to other people, places, times, and sensations” (193). See Vidal Claramonte (2025a, 2025b, 2026) for further usages.

in an effort to not only find solutions and resolutions but also companionship and solace. Along the way, they translate their culture.

5. Translating Haryanvi Textiles: An Intersemiotic Perspective

Borrowing from the theoretical framework discussed earlier, we can argue that Haryanvi material culture is translated through an ethnographic practice. Moreover, when Haryanvi women weave, create and embroider, they can be said to be translating from a cognitive idea into an action.

This section will explore more closely the various translational manoeuvres involved in producing these textiles.

5.1. The idea

The translation of Haryanvi textiles does not begin with the first weave or the stitch, but within a culturally constituted space where the textile is imagined as a sensory, material, cultural and social idea, before it even assumes physicality. Long before the weaving and embroidery are visible, Haryanvi women envisage colours, motifs, textures and patterns via experiences gathered over years of lived community reality. Hence, translation does not begin with material production but rather with the cultural imagination. The envisaged textile embodies the community and their collective identity and memories.

It was clear to us, as ethnographers, that these textiles are deeply embedded within the sociocultural fabric of Haryana. For most of our women respondents, the activities of embroidery and weaving are part of their everyday life, connected to the seasonal festivals, agricultural routines, kinship obligations, and rituals. More than through individual artistic inclination, the decisions regarding what, why, when and how to create are shaped by their social and cultural norms and expectations. Therefore, the final product emerges from those sociocultural relationships and from lived experience.

Our respondents mentioned that they remember motifs and patterns observed throughout their lives, and adapt them from their mothers and grandmothers, at times modifying them to fit contemporary tastes. This ensures that their creativity lies in continuously reinterpreting what they have inherited visually through their lived experience, delivering new meanings within new contexts. As such, it can be considered a form of translationality.

5.2. From idea to material production

The shift from a cognitive idea to material production may also be understood as a movement between two semiotic systems. The first semiotic system comprises sensory experiences, embodiment, memories, and sociocultural knowledge, while the second semiotic system materializes these experiences through the thread, colour and stitch of the textile. Translation takes place between these two semiotic systems as the imagined design is interpreted and transformed. It is through this process that these women function as translators of Haryanvi

social and cultural experience. Every colour, thread, design, and motif reflects cultural knowledge which they have inherited, and which is now materialized in a new context.

This step from cognitive thought to material production is mediated through the women's bodies, which occupy a central position in the translational process. When a woman weaves or embroiders, she holds the needle, thread, and the fabric close, maintaining a to-and-fro movement which establishes communication with the textile. The cognitive idea is now translated into a bodily action. Touch, which is crucial in this process, is not merely functional but also epistemological: it constitutes a way of knowing. Through their fingertips, the women repeatedly assess the texture and weave of the fabric, thickness of the thread, and pattern of embroidery. When doing so, they read and write through their own skin, allowing their body to facilitate creative decisions. The movements they make have been honed over the years. Indeed, the art of weaving and embroidering are internalized to such an extent that the body remembers how to do them even when the mind no longer instructs. This means that cultural memory is inseparable from bodily memory, as the ability to weave or embroider is not preserved through instructions but rather through repetitive physical actions done over the years. As for the textile produced, it is significant that this too will be touched and subsequently worn. Here, cultural memory becomes a sensory experience.

Many Haryanvi women (although fewer in number) continue weaving in traditional ways despite industrialization taking over. By doing so, they refuse to let go of their cultural memory, insisting on using their textiles and intimate modes of production to preserve their identity, and sociocultural history, for the coming generations.

For many of our respondents, the method as well as the designs, and hence, memory, were received from earlier generations and will be passed on to the next. Thus, as Haryanvi women weave and embroider, their actions connect them not only to the textile but also to their mothers, grandmothers, and mothers-in-law who taught them these skills, and their daughters and daughters-in-law, whom they themselves are teaching now.



Figure 7. A respondent embroidering; Another respondent spinning on the charkha²⁷

²⁷ Spinning wheel

6. Conclusion

As Susan Petrilli (2023, p. 356) observes, “The nature of meaning in the human world is semiotic, indeed intersemiotic, in translation”. Building upon this premise, the paper has argued that various kinds of intersemiotic processes are involved in the production of Haryanvi textiles, processes that are embodied and material, and which largely bypass the more abstract verbal dimensions usually understood by the term.

Our findings reveal that Haryanvi women translate cultural knowledge as they produce their textiles, transforming sensorial experiences, social and cultural memories, and traditions into materials and materiality. The process is also an agentive one since they create not only new pieces but also new discourses within a very restrictive patriarchal social space.

Meanwhile, we ourselves also produced an intersemiotic translation when we noted down our observations as the women wove, embroidered or knitted. Then, as ethnographers, we intra- and interlinguistically translated those notes and our respondents’ comments in the production of our ethnography. As Myrdene Anderson (2003, p. 394) observes, the “transformation of empirical participation and attentive observation into higher-order ethnography, rests on intuitive and informed acts of translation”.²⁸

Hopefully, these findings will contribute to a broader understanding of intersemiotic translation as an embodied and ethnographic process, and not just as an interaction between abstract sign systems. This framework delivers new possibilities for studying other forms of vernacular sociocultural traditions through the intersectional perspective of translation, ethnography, and material culture studies.

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²⁸ See Dhandhi and Sigroha (2025a, 2025b).

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